

Zhewen Zheng

INFO 498

*Inside* (Playdead, 2016) is a single-player puzzle-platformer adventure game, available on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Windows, iOS, and Nintendo Switch. The distribution type is both digital in.EXE and physical in discs. The initial release date is June 29, 2016. This game has a narrative genre of mystery and speculative fiction. It has a dystopia and mystery theme. In this game, the player controls an unnamed boy and explores a surreal, mostly monochromatic imagined world alone, moving through forests, rural areas, ruins, scientific laboratory. It also has a dark, adventurous, yet mysterious mood. Player gradually discovers clues of a dark scheme. This essay focuses on a thorough analysis of the game, covering its gameplay, rhetoric, and in-game learning using various frameworks for accurate evaluation.

Understanding the primitives of this game is fundamental for future analysis, which connects the building blocks of the game to agent behaviors. In *Inside*, the components consist of the characters (the boy, agents, dogs, etc.), boxes (different kinds of crates), propellers, platforms, buttons, doors, light orbs, checkpoints, and hazards (any area or object that can trigger death). These components, together with the changing environment defines the game space. The game space is 2.5D, side-scrolling in most cases, but some exceptions where the depth control is possible (to move in and out).

There are also actions from the player, component, and the system; these are termed by Sicart (2008) as mechanics invoked by different agents. The player can move left, right, jump, grab, and interact with other components that either extend or constrain available actions. The components themselves either have AIs (nonplayer agents), tied to the physics system (physical objects), activates on input or routinely (different machines, vehicles), or serve as remotes that can perform actions according to the instruction of agents (mind-control helmets and albinos, the

zombie-like bodies). Other actions originate from the system itself. The system triggers the spawn of components, either autonomous or inanimate, hostile or neutral, usually to assign challenge or assistance. The system also governs the underlying physics (water, light, gravity, etc.) and condition to player death. In terms of goals, *Inside* does not provide a clear goal for the players. The (invisible) checkpoints during progression serve as a means to save the progress but never a foreseeable goal; rather, the plot events that are driven by environment and nonplayer agents guide the player to an unknown development. Nonetheless, the player generally has to go towards the right of the screen (a goal almost inherent to indie side-scrollers).

Starting from the player perspective, we could focus on the aesthetic of the game. Hunicke et al. define the aesthetics of a game as the emotional responses which the game evokes in the player. In the case of *Inside*, sensation, fantasy, narrative, challenge, and discovery are those aesthetics. The *Inside* uses a rendering routine with a unique monochrome tone, accompanied by exceptional sound; these features create a one-of-a-kind experience that few games can offer. The story also sets in a fantastical setting with a dystopic hue, with the camera centering on the one special boy who searches for an answer, a place to be. Dialogless, this game creates a silent yet immersive narrative with the behavior of components, player's actions, and the contemplative mind that is playing the game in front of the screen. There are also many secret light orbs lying around the world, which is an integral part that constitutes the player discovery of the hidden map, the unspoken narrative, and an alternative ending.

Game dynamics, thus, form when the player tries to use the mechanics on components and executing actions to achieve the goal, which emerges from the aesthetics. There is no tutorial to this game; that is one of the pivotal features of this game. With no fancy orchestrated music, all

Zhewen Zheng

INFO 498

the players got is the camera around the boy, and the player is left to control. The first thing, if the player is a human with curiosity or experience with games at all, is trying out keys on the keyboard. Instinctively moving to the right, the player will encounter all kinds of puzzles and pursuits, and usually, since the player does not know what to do, the boy will die. Once the boy dies once, the player then starts looking for clues in terms of how can one overcome the challenge. Try out everything, one will, and while trying, one may or may not stumble into the secret light orbs.

The rhetoric, like the other game *Playdead* made, is ambiguous. However, the hints are littered everywhere; the weird pods lying around the world, the masked men in black, the mind-control helmet with albinos, the siren-like water creature hunting you, and more. It models a dystopic and despotic foreign world, and you are *Inside*. The Huddle, the abomination of human organs and limbs, consumes the boy when the boy disconnected the restraints. The player then starts to control the Huddle instead. Is this what supposed to be *Inside*? There are many guesses, but one popular theory about the rhetoric of *Inside* puts the focus on the two endings.

In the default ending, the player controls the Huddle, crashing through layers of means of containment, finally stopping at a shore, bathed in sunlight. An extremely significant clue sits right before the ending, where the Huddle crashes through the floor, landing on a diorama exactly the same as the ending scene. The alternative ending, however, tells the rhetoric more; after un-powering all the orbs, the player can control the boy back to the farm field where a secret bunker resides. Opening up the bunker with a musical cue, the player sees a computer, with the mind-control helmet, and a large power cord. The player unplugs the cord, and shortly after, the boy pauses in a similar fashion to the albinos. It is about control, the sense of identity,

and the desire to escape. The Huddle is a symbol for the hiveminds, a powerful, impulsive, and like the mind of the society. It tries to escape the idea of being controlled but ends up well within influence; the only way to get outside from *Inside* is to unplug from the game, to detach from society.

*Inside* includes game-based learning concepts, consisting mainly of cognitive aspects in the game-based learning design framework. Regarding cognition, the game aims to form a mental model for trial and error in the player's mind. Without guidance, most will fail and die, restart from the last checkpoint. The player sees the boy respawns, assuming another attempt, and this time with experience, where the learning can take place. But if the player manages to get to the alternative end, the player also learns that though the game is immersive and oneself had borrowed the identity of the character in the game for the whole experience. The player is the outside which controls the *Inside*, the boy breaks free by unplugging. But if our world becomes like the one the game, we cannot unplug; therefore, it turns into an open-ended question for the player to consider, because we have the responsibility to prevent such a regime from happening.

There are few special uses of this game aside from the educational purposes. Other indie game studio and the player can gain insight from its artform and the planning of rhetoric. It can be a means to self-question the balance between individual and society, and the tension between freedom and order.

*Inside* expresses information in both components and challenges; only with the designed components, and on-time actions, the player can pass a puzzle. Without attempting and failing,

Zhewen Zheng

INFO 498

the player can only resort to online walkthroughs, since no other means sufficiently and effectively help the player to proceed and reach the end.

At last, there is a small community around the game *Inside*. Since it is not a multiplayer game nor a game with expandable contents or updates, the community mostly contributes to plot analysis, in-game detail documentation, and meta-theories, which gives players an aftertaste to savor.